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AUTHOR Dalton, Starrette L.
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ABSTRACT

A new validation procedure was developed for the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) foreign language placement tests. The procedure recommended by CEEB determines if individuals with high and low scores (1) in the same course and (2) from courses at various levels, score differentially on the CEEB tests. If both these differences are statistically significant, high predictive validity can be inferred. An alternate procedure involves no such inference, but rather asks the student directly if he was correctly placed and, if not, whether he was placed too high or too low. Subjects in this study were taking Spanish, French, and German. Results of the new procedure showed 80 percent were correctly placed by the CEEB tests. A second alternative to the CEEB procedure was also tried. Scholastic aptitude indicators and foreign language background variables were obtained from the students' permanent records and used in a regression equation to determine student placement. This equation placed 62 percent of the students correctly. Placement by the CEEB tests was about equally accurate in all languages, and was significantly better than placement by the regression equation. It is argued that the new validation procedure is a valuable alternative to the CEEB procedure because it does not rely on grades and provides different information. (Author)

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EVALUATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE PLACEMENT: AN ALTERNATE APPROACH

The College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) placement tests are widely used to place college students who have had previous foreign language training. Typically, the student takes the exam prior to selecting a college language course and is placed according to the score he receives on the test. Local norms should be established by the foreign language departments.

There are many problems inherent in this procedure even when norms are properly developed and the test is judiciously used. Most of these problems concern the validity of the tests, i.e., how well do they place the students? Students may not be motivated to place into high level courses and consequently may deliberately score low. The placement test may arouse anxiety on the part of the student and elicit an uncharacteristic performance. If the student is examined several years after completing the study of the language in high school, his score may underestimate the level of ability he will exhibit after two or three weeks of renewed contact with the language. Evaluation of the placement exam is rendered even more difficult by the fact that reliability and validity data for the CEEB tests are not readily available.[1]

Other problems center around the difficulty of scheduling and administering the tests and the financial burden imposed

on the student. These problems are also related to validity in that they diminish in magnitude if evidence is provided that the test is serving a useful function by avoiding incorrect placement and its consequences.

How does one evaluate the validity of the CEEB placement tests? The method of the Educational Testing Service[2] is essentially one by which it is ascertained that those with high grades in language courses score higher on the placement test than those with lower grades, and that first year students score lower than second year students. A recent study by Aleamoni basically follows these guidelines, since he intended to "determine the degree of relation between the CEEB test scores and grades received in various courses."[3] Part of the logic underlying this approach is as follows: if students obtain A's or B's in first semester language courses, they are properly prepared to enter the next course in the sequence. Furthermore, if CEEB scores are highly correlated with grades, then CEEB scores can serve to assess the student's ability to enter the second course.

There are at least two notable problems with this validation procedure. First, as alluded to above, it does not allow for a review factor. That is, if "A" students from a first semester college language course obtain a certain score on the placement test, then it is assumed that students entering from high school with equivalent scores should be equally qualified

to enter the second semester. However, due to in-class review, those students who have not studied the language for a year or more may advance to third or perhaps even fourth semester competency after the first few days of class. The CEEB validation procedure is not sensitive to this type of misplacement unless it is very widespread. Thus it is probably more sensitive to overplacement than it is to underplacement.

Secondly, and far more importantly, the CEEB-Aleamoni approach to validation relies too heavily upon grades. Grading standards tend to differ across distinct sections of the same course,[4] and even the most extreme grades may be faulty indices of placement accuracy. An "A" may reflect poor placement in at least two ways. First, an "A" may be the characteristic grade of those students who were placed too low. Second, if a student were placed too high, an "A" may reflect excessive concentration on the language course at the expense of other curriculum areas. An "F," on the other hand, may be the result of student difficulties, such as social or personal distractions, which are independent of the placement procedure. In short, a student who receives an "A" may be poorly placed, whereas a student who receives an "F" may have been well placed.

The purpose of this study is to (1) assess the validity of the CEEB foreign language placement tests, (2) compare the validity of the CEEB across languages, (3) investigate an alternative method

of placement and compare it to the use of the CEEB, (4) isolate and compare factors important for placement in the different languages, and (5) partially evaluate the extent to which grades reflect accurate placement.

Method

Data were collected on a stratified random sample of 179/450 students at Indiana University who had taken the CEEB placement test in Spanish (55/152), French (77/201) or German (47/97) in the fall of 1973 and subsequently enrolled in a course in the foreign language in which they had taken the test. The samples were intended to represent one third of those who took the Spanish and French tests and one half who took the German test. A larger percentage was taken from German to provide a comparable and more reliable sample size. Due to attrition and the effort to sample at all levels, the proportions are not exact. French, Spanish, and German were selected because these are the only three languages for which both reading and listening sections of the CEEB tests were used for placement.

Placement scores (PLSC) were obtained from the student's permanent record. In lieu of using grades, each student was asked by means of a telephone interview if he had been well placed or poorly placed by the placement test. This information was gathered following completion of the course into which he had been placed. If he felt he had been poorly

placed, he was asked whether he had been placed too high or too low.

A stepwise regression equation was derived for each language. This procedure is an attempt to predict (from background variables) the correct level of placement (SELFPL). SELFPL was coded 1-5: 1 = first semester, 2 = second semester, 3 = first semester of second year, 4 = second semester of second year, and 5 = first semester of third year and above. The background variables were the CEEB Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, both quantitative (SATM) and verbal (SATV), high school percentile rank (HSR), semesters the student had studied the language in high school (SEMHS), whether or not the student had studied any foreign language in high school other than the one for which he took the placement exam (ALTLAN), and the time elapsed (in years) between high school graduation and the study of the language in college (YRLAG). It has been shown that measures of general aptitude are related to achievement in foreign languages.[5] Furthermore, it is assumed that the other data are of such obvious importance, at least potentially, that they merit inclusion in the regression equation.

Data were taken from two sources: the student's permanent record at the university (SATV, SATM, HSR, PLSC, and YRLAG) and the telephone interview (SEMHS, ALTLAN, and SELFPL). The regression equations were used to make

predictions for all students and a cross-tabulation was employed to determine the percentage of students whose regression equation placement coincided with their correct placement as determined by the telephone interview. The cross-tabulation was performed compositely for all languages and separately for Spanish, French, and German.

Results and Discussion

As indicated in column (1) of Table 1, the CEEB placement tests have high predictive validity, as used with this sample.[6] Eighty percent of the sample was well placed. There is no significant difference among languages, i.e., the tests work equally well for all three languages.

The regression equations which minimized the squared errors of prediction, i.e., gave the best weights for the four most important predictors, are given in Table 2. These equations can be applied directly to placement problems. For example, if a student who plans to enroll in German has had four semesters of high school German, studied two other foreign languages in high school, scored 400 on the SATV, and graduated from high school two years ago, the regression equation for German would place him in a second level German course.

Placement level
in German = .33380 (SEMHS) + 1.08388 (ALTLAN) + .00020 (SATV) - .22274 (YRLAG) - 1.13629
= .33380 (4) + 1.08388 (2) + .0020 (400 - .22274 (2) - 1.13629
= 2.0008 = (to closest integer) 2

The regression equations (column 2 of Table 1) placed 62% of the sample correctly and would clearly be an asset in placement if the CEEB placement tests were not available. The differential validity of the regression equations among languages is not significant. However, the use of the CEEB tests is significantly better than the regression equations (column 3). Specifically, 18% more students (32 Ss) were placed correctly by the CEEB tests than by the equations.

The regression equations based on the high school data (Table 2) are of further interest because the order of entry of these variables indicates variance accounted for, and to a certain extent, the importance of the different variables for placement considerations. As determined in this study, the most important background variables for college language placement are SEMHS and ALTLAN. Although, as would clearly be expected, SEMHS is the most important, ALTLAN is consistently among the first three predictors for all three languages.

Analysis of the data for those who were poorly placed indicates that high grades are not olosely related to accurate placement. Twenty-eight percent of those who were poorly placed received a grade of A, whereas 34% of the total sample

received an A. This difference is not statistically significant. Furthermore, nearly half (45%) of those who were poorly placed received either an "A" or a "B." This evidence indicates that grades, at least high grades, may be independent of correct placement and increases the author's skepticism with regard to the CEEB validation procedure which depends on a relationship between grades and placement scores.

The validation procedure used in the present study is an alternative to the CEEB procedure. This new procedure relies on student opinion instead of grades but does not rule out the simultaneous use of the CEEB procedure. The two methods can be viewed as complementary. The CEEB validation procedure provides a statistical test to evaluate the extent to which the placement test differentiates ability groups as defined by grades and course levels. The new validation procedure indicates (1) whether placement was successful beyond chance, (2) exactly which individuals were misplaced, and (3) the overall percentage of those correctly and incorrectly placed. It also lends itself to meaningful comparisons among languages and to comparisons with other placement procedures.

The student's evaluation of his placement may be a direct reflection of his satisfaction with the language department. When departments must concern themselves with enrollment and other factors related to student sentiment, student satisfaction is necessarily an important criterion. Our method of

validation is inherently sensitive to student dissatisfaction which results from placement whether it is warranted or not. As such it provides valuable information for the foreign language departments.

In conclusion, the CEEB placement tests, as used in the present study, placed 80% of the students correctly. They worked equally well in German, French, and Spanish. Consequently, high predictive validity is inferred. The use of high school data, particularly the number of semesters devoted to studying a language, is quite closely related to the appropriate level of placement. However, use of the CEEB placement tests was superior to placement determined solely by high school data.

Footnotes

[1]The author wrote Educational Testing Service for this information and received a manual for conducting a validity study. Reliability was not mentioned.

[2]College Entrance Examination Board College Placement Tests: Score Use and Interpretation Manual (Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1971).

[3]Lawrence M. Aleamoni, "A study of Foreign Language Learning at the University of Illinois," Measurement and Evaluation in Guidance, 5 (1973), 468-474.

[4]Judith A. Doerann, Equivalence of Grades in Multi-section Courses, Indiana Studies in Prediction, No. 22 (Bloomington: Bureau of Educational Studies and Testing, 1973).

[5]Jerry B. Ayers, Florinda A. Bustamante, and Phillip J. Campana, "Prediction of Success in College Foreign Language Courses," Educational and Psychological Measurement, 33 (1973), 939-942.

[6]Cut-off scores for the first five semesters of French, German, and Spanish were: French--200, 440, 499, 560, and 620; German--200, 449, 539, 599, and 649; Spanish--200, 419, 509, 569, and 619.

Table 1. Percentages Well Placed by the CEEB Examination and by the Regression Equations. ( ) indicates frequency.

	CEEB Test 1	Regression Equation Using High School Data 2	Difference between 1 and 2 3
All Languages Combined (N=179)	80 (143)	62 (111)	18** (32)
German (N=47)	83 (39)	70 (33)	13* (6)
French (N=77)	82 (63)	60 (46)	22** (17)
Spanish (N=55)	75 (41)	58 (32)	17* (9)

*p<.05
**p<.01

Table 2. Stepwise Multiple Regression Equations Indicating Order in Which Variables Were Entered and the Standard Error of Estimate for Each Language

Predicted Level of Placement in Each Language	Order of Variables Entered			
	First	Second	Third	Fourth
German =	.33380 (SEMHS) +	1.08388 (ALTLAN) +	.00020 (SATV) +	.22274 (YRLAG) - 1.13629
French =	.42128 (SEMHS) +	.00195 (SATM) +	.38866 (ALTLAN) +	.01017 (HSR) - 2.25713
Spanish =	.28158 (SEMHS) +	.01298 (HSR) +	.32506 (ALTLAN) +	.00089 (SATV) - .98632

Standard errors of estimate in German, French, and Spanish, respectively, were .77, .76 & .75.